

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~*Benefits and limitations*

SOVIET TELEVISION: A NEW ASSET FOR KREMLIN WATCHERS

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Although regularly scheduled television broadcasts began in most major industrialized countries in the early 1950s and soon surpassed radio and the press as the prime source of information for a large portion of the population, only in recent years has television begun to be widely used as a source of intelligence. This lag was largely due to the logistic problems of monitoring television and making it quickly available. The picture began to change in 1981 when the Foreign Broadcast Information Service acquired the capability to monitor television from satellites, and information from foreign television could be factored into the current intelligence process. Despite a promising start, television from most areas of the world remains an underutilized source that offers new opportunities and challenges to analysts.

Thus far, FBIS has had the most experience analyzing Soviet television. Initial FBIS efforts to monitor television from satellites were primarily targeted on the Soviet Union, which regularly transmits national television programming from Moscow by satellite to almost every corner of the country. This article attempts to draw on FBIS' early experience to identify some of the benefits, limitations, and still unsolved problems involved in integrating television sources into the intelligence process.

Using Soviet television as a source has posed methodological as well as logistic problems. Analysts pioneering the use of television did not have at their disposal the kinds of voluminous files and experience that have been amassed by Kremlin watchers over the years from the Soviet press and radio. Drawing on the methodology used in analyzing other media sources, FBIS analysts are now attempting to apply a systematic approach to Soviet television. While our experience with reviewing, analyzing, and storing texts of radio and press materials could be applied to the audio portion of television, developing a methodology for systematic exploitation of video material has proved to be a more challenging task.

The first lesson we learned is that analyzing television is extremely labor intensive. The visual material cannot be quickly scanned like a written account. The scanning and screening process requires a more serious commitment of time. The problem is compounded when the analyst sets out to compare Soviet coverage of a current event with treatment of like events in the past—the process at the heart of media analysis. Using Soviet newspaper sources, for example, an analyst with good files should be able to compare the printed reports on the last several appearances of the leadership in Red Square in a few minutes. Comparisons of television treatment of the same events require many hours. For example, parades attended by the Politburo in Red

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Square on May Day or the anniversary of the October Revolution last about two hours.

The second problem we encountered was the lack of a data base that could be used to determine the norm for Soviet television handling of various types of events. While it is useful to know how a current event is reported in the media, it is more useful to be able to assess that reporting in the perspective of past treatment of similar events. For many subjects, we are still at the stage of having only impressions of the patterns of Soviet television behavior. What we need is a solid basis for making comparisons. For example, an analyst viewing Soviet television coverage of a foreign leader visiting Moscow often does not yet have the data to evaluate that coverage in the perspective of Soviet television coverage of past visits by VIPs from the same or other comparable countries. As we begin to accumulate files, it is becoming evident that treatment of visitors on television is a useful means of gauging the state of relations between the Soviet Union and the countries represented by the visitors.

New systems for storage and retrieval must be developed for video material. Unlike back issues of newspapers, videotapes of previous Soviet television programs cannot be purchased or found in major libraries. To establish a data base on the Soviet leadership, FBIS began in 1981 to create videofiles of major appearances by Politburo members. To establish a basis of comparison for other materials, we began compiling written summaries of major news programs—brief descriptions of the audio and video content of every item on these programs, prepared by FBIS field bureaus.

Television as a Source

Television now reaches more than 90 percent of the Soviet populace, and efforts are under way to bring it to remote mountain areas and regions of the far north where it is not yet available. The broad impact television has on the Soviet population was strikingly evident in a Soviet survey published in 1983 which reported that 90 percent of those questioned said they receive most of their information on international and domestic events from the nightly news program VREMYA (Time). The high priority the regime attaches to television is clear from reports in Soviet professional journals that salaries are higher for those working in television than for people in comparable positions in other media.

Television in the Soviet Union is, of course, an integral part of the controlled media apparatus that encompasses TASS, radio, and the press. The content of television, like that of the other media, is calculated to serve party goals and policies. But because the message is conveyed visually as well as in words, the advent of television has significantly widened the window on the Soviet Union afforded by the public media.

For analysts of the Soviet Union, the video content is the most obvious new source of intelligence information provided by Soviet television. For political analysts, video coverage of the Soviet leadership has been particularly valuable during the post-Brezhnev transition of the past 3 years. During this period there has been intense interest in video both for the information it

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contains about the political status of leaders [(b)(3)(n)]

By monitoring television, FBIS can inform consumers about some significant leadership developments within minutes of when they are first seen in Moscow. Because some key programs are broadcast to eastern regions of the Soviet Union and monitored by FBIS before they are shown in Moscow, analysts in Washington learn of some developments before television viewers in the Soviet capital. While FBIS analysis of television video has focused primarily on the Soviet leadership, analysts elsewhere in the community have become avid consumers of video material showing Soviet weaponry, space exploits, industrial enterprises and technologies, agricultural production, and key personalities.

Beyond its purely visual aspects, Soviet television carries some of the most valuable reports, interviews, and commentaries available from the Soviet media. Due to the wide impact and prestige of key prime-time television programs, leading authorities are often featured as guests. For example, USSR deputy premiers and ministers frequently appear to discuss domestic topics, while the heads of major academic institutes often discuss domestic and international affairs. Guests of similar stature appear less frequently on radio.

Television commentaries on domestic and foreign affairs can provide important insights into regime concerns. The subject matter for VREMYA commentaries on domestic matters appears to be carefully selected and is used to elaborate issues raised at weekly Politburo meetings or to criticize specific ministries or sectors of the economy. Criticisms frequently draw responses from top officials which are aired in subsequent VREMYA telecasts. Television commentaries on foreign affairs give insight into official thinking on key issues and clues to how official policies are evolving. The speakers are frequently the regime's top foreign policy experts.

Programming

Two main Soviet television channels are broadcast from Moscow to virtually the entire country. Both are on the air from about 8 a.m. until 11 p.m., local time. Most programs of intelligence interest are on the first channel. The second channel contains primarily educational and cultural programming. The evening news and coverage of major events are carried simultaneously on both channels. In addition, many local areas also have their own stations that are not available from satellites. Surveys of the local Moscow station have shown little of intelligence value, but no surveys of local television in any other area have been conducted. A better understanding of Soviet national television programming can be gained from a brief survey of the regularly scheduled programs that have been the most productive sources of intelligence.

VREMYA is the major evening news program broadcast throughout the Soviet Union. It features reports and occasional commentaries on major domestic and international topics. It usually lasts about 35 minutes but is extended to cover major events, most often leadership activities. Unless there is live special-event coverage, VREMYA carries the most extensive highlights of leadership activities. Broadcast live during prime time in Moscow (9 p.m.) and repeated the next morning, it is the equivalent of the ABC, CBS, and NBC

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evening news rolled into one, and it is the only program aired without competition on all three channels available in major cities. It uses less video material than American network evening news programs, and the production comes across as less sophisticated. *VREMYA* is not immune from the kinds of bloopers that occur from time to time in live telecasts anywhere. In October 1983, for example, a report on developments on the Caribbean island of Grenada on the eve of the US-led invasion was read against the backdrop of a map showing Granada, Spain. The mistake was quickly recognized and a correction was read at the end of the program.



Wrong map with Grenada report . . . Error was corrected.

VREMYA is updated throughout the day for various time zones, and versions of the program have already been shown in most areas of the Soviet Union before it is aired in Moscow. During a visit to the Moscow television studios in 1982 I was told that three versions of the program are broadcast live every day and that they are recorded and updated to create several additional versions. Each of these can include late-breaking material as well as unique items designed to appeal to specific regional audiences.

Novosti (News) is a shorter news program, usually lasting between 5 and 15 minutes, several different versions of which are broadcast during the day. It is often the first source of video coverage of major events. During my visit to the Moscow television studios I was told that all versions of *Novosti* are broadcast live except for two to the Far East, which are recorded before the end of the work day in Moscow for later transmission.

THE WORLD TODAY is Moscow's only regularly scheduled weekday television commentary on world events. Two different versions of the program, usually lasting 15 minutes, are broadcast each weekday. It is hosted by a

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"political observer," a leading commentator who prepares his own remarks, and usually contains several short segments on current international topics. At the Moscow studios I was told that the host of the program is totally responsible for its content. In addition, I learned that this program is recorded shortly before air time and that there is no time to make any changes even if mistakes occur. Video plays a relatively minor role on the program, and most footage used appears to be of non-Soviet origin.

INTERNATIONAL PANORAMA is a weekly 45-minute program with reports by Soviet television correspondents from around the world. It covers a broad range of subjects and can provide useful insights on important international issues. A frequent host of the program, Genadiy Gerasimov, told me that the host writes his own material and selects the correspondents' reports that are used. Gerasimov said the program is usually recorded in a single session on Saturday for broadcast on Sunday and that it is shown without editing or retakes unless a serious mistake occurs.

I SERVE THE SOVIET UNION is a weekly 1-hour program on Soviet military affairs. It often provides video of military equipment and training of high interest to the intelligence community. It also contains commentaries on military affairs and has occasionally provided the fullest available version of speeches by the Defense Minister and other officials.

STUDIO NINE is a monthly 1-hour discussion program on international affairs. The most authoritative and prestigious regularly scheduled foreign affairs program on radio or television, **STUDIO NINE** often offers valuable commentary on major current international affairs topics. Guests on the program include some of the most influential Soviet foreign affairs experts. **STUDIO NINE** uses little supplementary video material, a practice moderator Valentin Zorin has described as considered policy. Advanced preparation clearly takes place, but some participants exhibit a degree of spontaneity suggesting that the program is unrehearsed. According to a leading Soviet journalist, **STUDIO NINE** is Zorin's "own program" and Zorin personally oversees its production, writes his own material, and selects the guests. In a 1982 interview, Aleksandr Bovin, a frequent guest on the program, alluded to the special place that **STUDIO NINE** occupies in Soviet media programming. While acknowledging that "polemics" are "not particularly accepted" in the Soviet Union, he remarked that he engaged in them "occasionally" on **STUDIO NINE**.

Other regularly scheduled programs provide basic intelligence information on a wide variety of domestic issues. For example, the weekly 1-hour program **PROBLEMS, SEARCH, SOLUTION** is an important source of economic data. It frequently has ministers or other top officials as guests, and it carries extensive interviews with them on specific aspects of the economy. Viewers have on occasion been invited to call in with questions while the program is in progress, affording insight into popular concerns. The weekly program **LIFE AND SCIENCE** often has the Soviet Union's top scientists as its guests and deals with a wide range of issues from the economy to high technology.

Much of the most valuable information from Soviet television is carried on special programming. Many of these programs are pegged to specific events such as major occasions attended by the top Soviet leadership, speeches by

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republic first secretaries on important local anniversaries, and press conferences by top Soviet officials. Other specials—including features on the consequences of nuclear war or on US activities in Latin America—appear to reflect current concerns of the regime. Presumably in order to reach a broad audience, on a few occasions special unscheduled announcements have been carried during hockey games. For example, in an effort to prevent hoarding occasioned by rumors of a price hike, a top official went on the air in the middle of a major match in November 1981 to deny that any increase was imminent.

It was on television in September 1983 that the Soviet public heard the most elaborate defense of the downing of the Korean Airlines passenger plane. Although reports of a highly unusual 2-hour press conference explaining the incident were carried by all Soviet media, the most complete one was shown on a special 75-minute telecast. It contained extensive excerpts of the conference and omitted little of substance. In several cases questions of obvious sensitivity raised by foreign correspondents were aired in an apparent effort to show viewers that the Soviet version of the incident was being strongly challenged abroad. A map shown during the broadcast provided specific details of the Soviet version of the incident, and photographs of it distributed by FBIS were used by top US officials in briefings on the incident. No other version of these Soviet graphics was available in Washington at the time.

Soviet Leadership on Television

For political analysts, probably the most productive aspect of television monitoring has been the new information it has provided to help penetrate the closely guarded secrets of politicking within the Politburo. Video coverage of the Soviet leadership gives a much more complete picture of events than the still photographs that have long been the staple fare of Kremlinologists. In addition to the information on the relative protocol standing of the top leaders that is provided by newspaper photos, video coverage adds another dimension that can convey more subtle messages, (b)(3)(n)

Unlike photographs which can be carefully staged and even doctored, video is much more difficult to control or manipulate, particularly when events are covered live.

The practice of providing live coverage of major leadership speeches has presented special problems for the aging Soviet leadership. In Brezhnev's last years there appeared to be uncertainty about his ability to speak in public. At the February 1981 party congress he was taken off the air and was replaced by an announcer after he dropped major sections of his speech in the first 7 minutes and had obvious physical difficulties. In an apparent effort to avoid similar embarrassment, plans for live coverage of his speech to a March 1982 trade union congress were canceled at the last minute, and a recording of his speech was shown later in the day. A speech 2 months later was shown live but, in a departure from normal practice, was not announced in advance.

Live coverage also created an embarrassment for Brezhnev during a trip to Baku in September 1982 when he started reading the wrong speech. As he

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began reading, other leaders became visibly agitated and an aide brought him the correct version. Brezhnev was slow to react. After a minute of apparent confusion, his aide interrupted him, saying, "Leonid Ilich, I implore you. . ." Only then did Brezhnev realize what was happening and begin reading the new text. This incident was omitted from subsequent media accounts of the meeting.

Shifts from the normal pattern of television coverage can provide other important clues about the leadership.

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Television coverage of the leadership is not always evenhanded. At times it appears intentionally to favor a particular Politburo member. For example, when Gorbachev presented an award in Smolensk on 27 June 1984 the event was highlighted as the first item on that evening's *VREMYA*. Normally the General Secretary is the only leader whose activities lead off the news. In contrast, similar award presentations in June and July 1984 by Politburo members Vorotnikov and Ustinov received less prominent attention on *VREMYA*, appearing as the fifth and tenth items on the cast. Several months later, Gorbachev's chief rival as the successor to Chernenko, Party Secretary Grigoriy Romanov, appeared to be shown special favor in coverage of a Kremlin award ceremony for Foreign Minister Gromyko, attended by the entire leadership. Romanov stood next to Gromyko during the ceremony and at several points the camera paused on the two leaders. Except for Chernenko, none of the other Politburo members received similar favor. In each case, the special attention given to Gorbachev and Romanov came at a time when other indicators suggested an effort to give them a particularly high profile.

Intentionally or not, television coverage can also help cast light on the personal relationships among leaders. Informal interactions among Politburo members shown on television have been revealing, sometimes suggesting that certain leaders are uncomfortable dealing with each other. Television coverage has also yielded evidence of close personal relations among leaders. For example, televised coverage of Andropov's funeral showed Gorbachev sitting with Andropov's widow and family. The fact that he was the only leader shown alone with the family reinforced the impression that had developed while Andropov was alive that a close relationship existed between the two. The decision to include this footage on television added to other signs that Gorbachev might have a strong position in the new regime.

Video coverage of events can provide other kinds of information about the leadership that is not available from other media. During Brezhnev's last years it was often evident only from television that Chernenko was acting as Brezhnev's closest assistant. For example, Chernenko's role in a Kremlin ceremony commemorating Brezhnev's 75th birthday could not be gleaned from the formal press photograph, but television clearly showed Chernenko standing close to Brezhnev and assisting him at several points during the ceremony.

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Television coverage of Brezhnev's funeral provided a rare glimpse into Politburo politics when it showed Party Secretary Kirilenko standing with Brezhnev's family and friends, not with other Politburo members. This indication that he was to be removed from the Politburo appeared two weeks before the official announcement.



Kirilenko shown with Brezhnev's family . . . Political indicator.

Our experience with Soviet television so far has uncovered only the tip of the iceberg. Other aspects of Soviet television of potential intelligence value have not yet been explored, particularly programming dealing with social and cultural issues. For other countries of the world, a great deal remains to be done. Initial use of (b)(1) East European, Chinese, and Korean television suggests that these will also be productive sources, and we are only now beginning to probe the potential of television from other regions. This will be a long-term, continuing effort as capability for monitoring and transmitting the yield from foreign television develops—and as television itself comes into wider use and becomes more sophisticated in countries where it is not yet a prime medium of communication.

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